

Taking a Special Needs Child Overseas? What to Know Before You Go

By Rebecca “Becky” Grappo, M.Ed

The idea of an overseas assignment for a family often evokes images of adventure, excitement, travel, and new cultural experiences. For the tens of thousands of expatriates around the world, international living can be all of the above...and more. But what should a family with a special needs child know before moving overseas?

First of all, the needs of an individual child must be carefully assessed to be absolutely sure that those needs can be met at the new international school. This is often not as easy as it may look and the answer is as varied as the children themselves. Each child has unique needs, so a school that can serve one special need may not be able to serve another. Before going abroad it is critical that the child has a current and complete evaluation that specifically outlines what the educational road map for the child will be. Usually, this comes in the form of a detailed medical or psycho-educational evaluation and/or an Individualized Education Plan, if coming from an American public school. As one special education teacher so wisely put it, “More than ever before, be honest about your child’s needs and realistic about the expectations you have for them and a school, because there are often no second choices for schools at foreign posts.”

In the United States, there is a federal mandate through the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) to educate every child in the least restrictive environment. International schools, including those with the word “American” in the name, are not bound by IDEA, or any other law, to provide services to children with learning or physical disabilities. While there are more overseas schools than ever before willing to accept and work with a special needs child, services can be very inconsistent – not only between schools, but also within the same school. Here are some of the factors at play:

- Many international schools are run by either a board or are proprietary schools. Therefore, there are varying degrees of willingness to offer special needs programs. Often, the reasons are size of school, cost, or availability of trained specialists. But there may also be resistance to offering services for special needs children because the school is not interested in serving this population, especially if the school is in a location where there are waiting lists and admissions are more selective.
- Faculty and staff in international schools may have frequent turnover – a special education teacher, specialist, or therapist who may be at the school one year may take another international assignment and be gone the next. Parents should also ask about the qualifications and credentials of any specialist, as well as how long that teacher will be there. Furthermore, the school’s program is also only as good as the buy-in and willingness to cooperate on the part of the classroom teachers and administrators.
- Looking at the needs of the child, it is also important to ascertain whether other support services the child needs will be in place, for example, are there licensed speech and language therapists? Physical therapists? Occupational therapists? Psychological and/or psychiatric support, if needed? Can medications the child needs be found at the new location and adequately monitored by a physician? And if the services are available, who pays for them?
- If the child has a physical disability, is the school and housing overseas accessible? I once worked with a family who had never thought to ask the question on behalf of their physically disabled child, and were unpleasantly surprised by the answer once they arrived at their new home overseas.

There are many families who are finding services for their children and have found great success educating their children internationally. I asked some of those parents what advice they have for parents struggling to find support for their children with special needs. One parent who found services for her child in Brussels, South Africa and London, offers this sage advice, “Never assume – ever!” She further urges parents to confirm, preferably in writing, that the school has room for the child, has reviewed the child’s documentation, can offer the needed services, and will confirm this *in writing* before accepting the international assignment. If parents wait until arrival to sort this out, they may be in for a rude surprise when they discover that the services are not offered, the child may not be accepted, or the school is filled to capacity. She wisely adds, “If you catch yourself using the word “probably” that means you *definitely* need to confirm.”

Another experienced parent, who has been doing the “overseas special education dance” for nearly thirteen years, reminds parents that finding the right program overseas takes a lot of time, determination and devotion, and it’s tough. Now in Dublin, she has found services for her son with significant disabilities, but he had to wait six months to be eligible in Irish public schools. She recruited and brought a trained teacher with her to the new assignment to help reinforce the lessons from school and provide assistance with her son at home. Before moving to an assignment, she always spends a great deal of time researching resources on the internet to be sure that she can find the services her son will need. Over the years, she has devoted a tremendous amount of time towards ensuring that her son gets the best possible educational program, and she now feels he has flourished more overseas than he might have at home. She sums it up by saying, “Easy, no. Worth it, yes.”

Other parents wonder if the move will be worth it. One family with an autistic child wonders if the international move will be worth giving up the hard-won special education services the public school system in the United States can offer her child. They have a home Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) program, outstanding private speech and occupational therapy services, and assistive technology for their child. Will they be able to duplicate those services in their new location?

Yet another family found that there would not be adequate services for their developmentally-disabled son at their new international home. Before leaving the base school in the U.S., the mother spent a huge amount of time in his special education classroom to understand the instructional strategies that best met his educational needs. She then crafted her own home-schooling program for him based on what she had learned in addition to the roadmap in his IEP, and he made tremendous progress. Other families I have known have hired a teacher to accompany them abroad to help home-school. Still other families have hired an aide to accompany the child in class, with the blessing of the international school. These families have found success by being open to creative solutions.

Other families have not been as successful, no matter how hard they have tried. One family I assisted was promised support and services for their high-school-age daughter, only to find that nothing materialized once they arrived overseas. After a year of the child struggling at school and home, and the parents struggling to make the school deliver on their promises, the family decided that a boarding school with a specialized learning support program would be the best option for their daughter. In a different educational setting with trained specialists, this teen flourished and regained her self-confidence. She is now thriving in college, an option that was almost unthinkable for her during her freshman year of high school. Her parents and she agree that boarding school was the best option they could have chosen for her at that point in time.

The common thread that runs through all these stories is that successful children are ones with parents who steadfastly and proactively advocate for their child and never give up. A mother recounts that the school granted her daughter extended time for exams, but the teacher, who didn’t “believe” in learning disabilities, refused to give it. She had to fight the same battle again and again, but in the end her daughter was successful. The most desirable situation is one in which the school, parents, and students are in partnership with one another, working together towards the common goal of making the student successful. When everyone pulls together, the chances for success are greatest.

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